

NEWS ANALYSIS

A sight for sore ears

Microsoft may scoff, but the software giant and mobile phone manufacturers are shaken by Apple's reinvention of the smartphone, as Paul Nesbitt explains

After months of frenzied speculation, Apple finally confirmed that it has been working on a music-playing mobile telephone called the iPhone. Although it won't be available in the US until June, it has already been praised for its stunning new interface, criticised for its high price and provoked a lawsuit from Cisco, which claims that it owns the name iPhone.

The iPhone is a three-in-one device that combines a 2.5G mobile phone, a widescreen iPod music player with touch-screen controls and internet capabilities that include BlackBerry-style email and web browsing.

Feature-packed smartphones are nothing new, and Apple's proposed price of \$499 (around £250) for the 4GB model and \$599 (around £300) for the 8GB model raised some eyebrows. This is particularly expensive as the phone is available only with a two-year subscription to phone services from Cingular Wireless.

SOFT CELL

Speaking on US TV, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer poured cold water on Apple's ambitions in the phone market. "It is the most expensive phone in the world and it doesn't appeal to business customers because it doesn't have a keyboard, which makes it not a very good email machine," he said.

"Right now we're selling millions and millions of [Windows Mobile-based] phones a year. Apple is selling zero phones a year. In six months they'll have the most expensive phone by far ever in the market place," he added.

Windows-based phones can do pretty much everything the iPhone can, albeit without the style. "We've got great Windows Mobile devices in the market. Today you can get a Motorola Q phone for \$99 (around £50). It's a very capable machine; it'll do music, it'll do internet, it'll do email, it'll do instant messaging. I look at that and I say I like our strategy. I like it a lot," said Balmer.

However, Apple believes that just as the iPod's easy-to-use



interface helped it dominate the music player market, so the iPhone's touch-screen interface will produce another blockbuster. It didn't invent the smartphone, but it may just have created the first user-friendly smartphone.

EASY DOES IT

Devices such as the BlackBerry, Treo or Windows Mobile handsets are not the easiest gadgets to use. They suffer from a surfeit of fiddly buttons and indecipherable menus. Apple's main innovation has been to simplify the complex, which is much harder than it looks.

"The iPhone is a revolutionary product that is literally five years ahead of any other mobile phone," said Steve Jobs, Apple's CEO. "We are all born with the ultimate pointing device – our fingers – and iPhone uses them to create the most revolutionary user interface since the mouse."

Jobs may have built a career out of hyperbole, but the iPhone is packed with great touches that make you wonder why no-one ever thought of them before. The 3.5in screen presents context-sensitive interfaces depending on what you're doing. Some may not like the onscreen keyboard for texting and dialling, but it's surely an advance on the fiddly rubber keyboards and complex clamshell or sliding keyboard designs that most smartphones use.

The iPhone lets you resize images by pinching two fingers together on the screen to make them smaller and spreading them to enlarge. The phone's web browser, a customised version of Apple's Safari, can browse standard webpages. You can use intuitive touch-screen gestures to zoom in and out. That certainly beats looking at second-class web content that has been readjusted for phone web browsers.

VOCAL HARMONY

One of the iPhone's best features is Visual Voicemail, which lets you browse visually through a list of voicemails as if they were email messages. You can choose which to listen to, rather than having to listen to them all in the order in which they were recorded.

Jobs said this feature was possible because of work done by Cingular, which explains why the company decided to go exclusively with this network. The voicemail system alone will make this phone a must-have for some people.

Another ingenious touch is the built-in proximity sensor, which automatically deactivates the touch-screen controls and turns off the screen to save the battery when you are talking on the phone. It's another deceptively simple idea that oozes good design.

However, the iPhone is not without its critics. Its battery life of

five hours of talktime is not terrible, but there are mobiles such as the Sony Ericsson W810i that claim nine hours.

The iPhone's lack of a removable battery option may be more serious, especially with the iPod's track record of battery failures. Another downside is the lack of a VoIP client, which could have been used to make free calls when in a WiFi hot spot. This is probably the Faustian bargain Apple had to make in order to persuade a network operator to subsidise the phone.

The two-megapixel camera, with no flash or zoom control, won't win any prizes either. After the complaints Apple received over its iPod casings being prone to scratching, sceptics have questioned how durable the touch-sensitive screen will be.

CRAWL WAITING

Apple's decision to make its quad-band phone a 2.5G device may also be a mistake, especially as markets such as Europe and Japan are adopting the much-faster 3G networks. Analysts warned that 2.5G download speeds are slow, typically 100KB/s. "The iPhone demos at Macworld were amazing, but they were using WiFi," said wireless industry analyst Peter Gorham. "What happens when the user is not within WiFi range? A full HTML Safari web browser and email will slow to a crawl on a 2.5G network."

Apple also faces a trademark dispute with Cisco, which launched a VoIP handset called the iPhone in December, and filed a lawsuit against Apple the day after it announced its new handset.

Apple has said that if it gets one per cent of the mobile phone market it will sell 10 million iPhones in the first year. Analysts have predicted sales of anywhere between two and 15 million.

Whether or not Apple's iPhone succeeds, its launch has given the mobile phone market a shock. If nothing else it should kick-start a new generation of handsets that are easier to use and, we hope, more affordable. **CS**